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ABSTRACT

Trends and problems involved in administrative decentralization of special education services are examined. Noted is the exclusion of special education from recent political and administrative decentralization attempts in large urban settings. Increased emphasis on mainstreaming is seen to necessitate greater role clarification between special and general administrators and teachers in central and area levels of decision making. Proposed are two organizational models: structural (based on client or service and clinical classification, statistical incidence, or type of service indicated) and functional (based on a division of leadership functions rather than instructional organization or population type being served). It is suggested that the functional approach helps to maintain a balance of power between central and regional offices in large decentralized systems. (CL)

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ORGANIZATION FOR LEADERSHIP IN LARGE SYSTEMS: THE DECENTRALIZATION DILEMMA

by

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We special educators have been able to pride ourselves with usually being in the forefront of general educational movements. It is frequently pointed out, with only a little exaggeration of the facts, that in such things as instructional technology and individualization of instruction, special educators have provided the cutting edge of developments, foreshadowing what would become accepted as "good practice," maybe even "standard practice" in education as a whole in due time. The conceptualization of "special education as experimental education" has been suggested by Burrello, Tracy, and Schulz (1973).

In another vein it can be safely claimed that the philosophy of "students' rights" and "appropriate education for all," which has implications throughout education as a whole as courts become involved, has a major root in the thrust of the advocates for handicapped children who have seen litigation and legislation as the means of securing Fourteenth Amendment guarantees to due process and equal protection under law.

There are undoubtedly other specific examples which would advance the argument that special education has led the way for the larger field. However, it is doubtful that such a claim can be made if we are looking at basic organization of the educational establishment itself, or at organizational models for service delivery in special education. As organizational theorists or practical implementors of innovative structures, we special educators have not been notably creative. Perhaps there is no reason to expect it to be. It hasn't been our bag. Especially notable by its absence has been any contribution to theory or practice in organization for large systems, where multiple complex pressures on the school systems as a whole have forced evaluation of existing structures and experimentation with new, improved models for service delivery.

If we focus on large system organization, a major issue of the past decade has been the search for optimal administrative units to achieve responsiveness to clients, effective service delivery and efficient management. In large systems this has unavoidably been translated as "how to decentralize." Increasing awareness on the part of the general public regarding the almost automatic failings of large bureaucracies, the rise of consumerism, the drive for "maximum feasible participation" by clients in decisions which affect their welfare, has led administrators and policy makers in very large school systems inexorably to the conclusion that some form of decentralization is an absolute necessity. It is almost a given fact that decentralization be accomplished, leaving only the questions of what form and precisely how it should be carried out.

The specific factors which constitute the core of the decentralization issue have been discussed in detail by Cronin (1973), Nystrand and Cunningham (1970), and by Gittell (1967). In these and other works the distinction has been drawn between political decentralization, which involves true community control with grass roots participation in major policy matters, and the less dramatic process of administrative decentralization, in which major policy matters are retained by a central board and only administrative details are delegated to school executives operating in a more localized setting. While only a couple of examples of true political decentralization are usually cited, New York City and Detroit, it is generally acknowledged that the pressures which brought about those experiments, with their highly equivocal results, have caused a great number of other systems to take positive steps toward administrative decentralization. Perhaps such steps were taken as a hedge against more revolutionary attacks on establishment control, as a window dressing token. Or from a less jaundiced view, the positive examples of such administrative decentralization can be interpreted as honest attempts to achieve more effective service delivery by careful and conservative adjustments to

the executive processes.

While major urban school systems have been conscientiously wrestling with these organizational issues, we special educators have not been prominent in the debate. This may be understandable in view of our usual concern with needing to secure an adequate population base to warrant the establishment of a service for a low incidence need. Special educators have been prominent in the establishment of organizational structures which centralize by consolidation or by the formation of intermediate units, cooperatives, joint agreements, etc. Our concern has tended to be focused on how to get a sufficiently large organization for our purposes. In terms of gross numbers, systems already having sufficient size to deliver services effectively and efficiently were few, and therefore relatively ignored by those special educators interested in organizational matters.

As the trend toward decentralization of large systems accelerated during the late 1960's, the question of how to treat special education services under the new organizational structures became very pertinent. But little in the way of empirical data or well founded theory was available as a guide. A study conducted by the Los Angeles City system (Hodgeson, 1960) had dealt partially with the question, and had gathered opinions of persons conceded to have a basis for expert judgment about special education in large systems. However, conclusions drawn from information generated by that study were extremely tentative, due to the wide variety of opinions expressed and practices described.

When the most dramatic attempt at full scale political decentralization, with community control, was launched in New York City in 1967 and finally institutionalized by legislation in 1969, special education and a number of other components of the central system were specifically excluded from the plan. Among the conditions cited as demonstrating the failure of the New York City reorganization to really involve community control, and to merely constitute a

form of administrative decentralization, is the exclusion of high schools, special education, vocational education, and such from the reorganization package. The fact that certain aspects of the total school program were seen as requiring centralized control and administration, is held up by critics as evidence that the professional establishment, the central board, the central administrators, as well as the teachers' union, were unwilling to give change a fair chance for fear of loss of secure power. On the other side is the argument that certain portions of the total public school program and/or certain functions of administration cannot be expected to adequately occur in other than the largest possible organizational units. Whatever the interpretation, in the nation's largest decentralization effort, special education retained its centralized base of operations.

The first notable effort to give concerted national study to this issue was initiated under joint sponsorship of the Leadership Training Institute/Special Education at University of Minnesota and the Council of Great City Schools, who convened a conference on Special Education in School System Decentralization in Boston in December, 1973. Funds from the Exceptional Children's Programs, Bureau of Adult and Occupational Education, U.S.O.E., supported the activity which brought together special education administrators from many of the nation's largest school systems.

The report of that conference (Reynolds, 1975) included results of a survey conducted in 1973, with returns from twenty large school system directors of special education, twelve of which described their general school system organization as decentralized. While summarization of the survey data was difficult, due to the open ended nature of the survey instument, some general observations were set forth which appear to be of interest.

In the process of planning for general decentralization, special educators were significantly involved in only a minority of the systems. More often, they were included by courtesy only or not at all, since special education was

not going to be decentralized with the rest of the system. While the style of each city's decentralization was unique, in most cases the special education organization was altered very little. "In five cities no change occurred at all." (Nash, 1975) In others, there were administrative shifts into the area structures, with planning and coordination functions still centralized. A breakdown of fourteen functions indicated that most functions were totally decentralized in only one or two systems, if any. More systems retained functions at a centralized level, but in even more systems the pattern for assignment of administrative functions was described as shared, between central and area offices.

It was also pointed out that increased emphasis on mainstreaming practices, with inherently increased interaction between special and general administrators, there will be a need for role clarification between central and area personnel, to deal with unavoidable role ambiguities. It appeared that the degree of decentralization of function varied between high and low incidence programs, as might be expected, but that any programmatic innovation which might be anticipated as a result of the flexibility inherent in relatively localized authority had not been evident. A rational explanation for this would be that the newness and incompleteness of the decentralization for special educators has them focusing primarily on coping with role, communication and visibility problems rather than on programmatic innovation. Territorial maintenance was suggested as a major concern for special education administrators in newly decentralized systems, regardless of whether the special education department was included as a part of the reorganization package.

The information gleaned from the forementioned survey, as well as the concepts advanced by presenters and reactors at the Boston conference, seems to suggest that decentralization, to whatever extent it includes special education, and program innovation, to whatever extent an institutional response

is made to the forces that demand it, together create a need for an organizational design, applicable to large systems, which can accommodate for the division between and sharing of centralized and decentralized administration.

Such a design could be based on either of two organizational principles, a structural model or a functional model. Each of these models could in turn be developed in a variety of ways, with obvious and perhaps some not so obvious effects.

If we limit our discussion to large school systems, e.g., those over 75,000 enrollment, we will be speaking to an existing concern for a good number of administrators, representing a major portion of the nation's programmatic efforts in special education. This is not a trivial concern. It should also be safe to assume some form of two-layered organization, with overlapping central and regional jurisdictions, each with administrative personnel, with a governing board at the central level, and possibly (though probably not) an additional board at the regional (decentralized) level. Further, it should be assumed that each decentralized region should have a total pupil base of from 20,000 to 40,000. Units smaller or greater than this probably distort most of the rationale upon which large system decentralization is based.

In most systems, the relationship between both the central and regional offices of special education and the school building administration is more staff than line. The operational accountability of the building principal for all programs, including special education, is maintained with a direct line to regional and/or central general administrators, but not to the special education administrators.

Given this basic total system organization, how can we best organize special education? What should be assigned centrally, and what should be handled regionally?

A STRUCTURAL APPROACH

If we choose a structural approach, there are at least three rational

means by which we could handle the administrative process. Each of the structural approaches is based on some form of client or service classification, delineated either on statistical incidence, clinical classification, or type of service indicated.

A differentiation on the basis of statistical incidence can be made with simplicity and logic. Conditions of pupils occurring in low incidence, e.g., much less than one percent in the general school population, could be assigned for all administrative purposes to the broadest based, centralized management unit. Such assignment would be based on the assumption that a client population requiring some basically similar type of service should comprise something on the order of 100 pupils (age 3-21) in order to constitute a viable planning and service unit. For example, severely hearing impaired children, whose incidence in the population might approximate .17, would not be likely to total more than 30 in a decentralized region of 30,000 and should therefore be assigned for service programs to the larger central system. On the other hand, children whose common educationally related needs occurred in one percent or more of the general population would constitute a group of at least 200, age 3-21, and would, therefore, become an entirely viable service unit within the decentralized area, and should have their needs adequately met without resort to the larger organization.

Applying this incidence criteria would probably result in centralized administration for programs for orthopedically handicapped, trainable and profoundly retarded, autistic, multiple handicapped, home and hospital bound, visually impaired and severely hearing impaired. Service by decentralized region would probably be viable for educable retarded, emotionally disturbed, specific learning disabilities, speech handicapped, socially maladjusted and gifted. It is immediately evident that a classification problem may occur as we attempt to differentiate between speech and hearing problems, where mild hearing conditions, supplemental to speech impairments would fall into the high

incidence side while only slightly more severe hearing conditions would belong to the centralized, low incidence population. A similar difficulty may occur as we attempt to distinguish between levels of emotional disturbance, mental retardation and physical handicap, but for most purposes, given the unfortunate way we are habituated to classifying kids, the method would probably work.

An only slightly different approach would be to ignore incidence as such, and classify strictly on the basis of clinical types of disability. Such a plan would at least permit the deployment of instructional and supervisory expertise to the level at which the population was assigned. It could result in much the same assignment between levels as that found in the statistical approach, since the rationale for assignment would have to take incidence into consideration, but might warrant some differences on the basis of presumed commonality of need among a disability group, regardless of degree of severity. Using such logic, all services for the mentally retarded might be assigned to decentralized regions, since together such pupils would constitute a large population, and perhaps the same could be justified for all levels of social-emotional maladjustment and functional speech handicaps. This might leave physical and sensory impairments to the larger centralized level, which, it could be argued, would permit a focus on methodological and prosthetic intervention to the instructional program more than curricular modification. However, logical breakdowns occur in that model, also. The severely autistic and profoundly retarded child probably would not receive optimal service from the resources available in an organizational unit of only 30,000 pupils.

A third approach that is still basically structural would be to classify the type of instructional service, ignoring both incidence and clinical category of disability. Such an approach has viability only where the total system has the readiness to adopt a full continuum or cascade of services,

ranging from consultative resource through itinerant and resource instruction to self contained, full-time classes and school centers. Under this approach all services which are delivered in an essentially self contained mode, isolated from personnel working in the mainstream education and with children who have minimal contact with regular classes, should be operated by the central administration. Services which are more articulated with the mainstream, such as resource teachers, itinerant teachers and consultants would be administered by the decentralized unit, where proximity to regular teachers and administrators could be optimized. Under the plan, a teacher's line of responsibility would be based on his organization for teaching rather than the type or incidence rate of the disabilities with which he was working, and the expertise of leadership personnel would also be deployed on the basis of the instructional model being used rather than any other factor. This approach makes the assumption that regardless of etiology or incidence, the optimum instructional mode for a child can be specified and the delivery of a given type of service can be best organized and supervised from single, rather than multiple levels of administration.

Under all of the structural models discussed above, the assumption is made that persons carrying responsibility for special education will be employed at both the central and regional administrative offices, that some division of labor is needed, and that the assignment of responsibility can be attached to programs of services and/or classification of children.

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

A quite different logic to division of labor between central and regional offices can be utilized by viewing the total task in terms of the leadership functions to be fulfilled without regard to the instructional organization or clientele being served. A simple way of classifying on this dimension would be to identify the separate processes which together constitute the total leadership role, and then to determine whether the nature of the tasks permits

a reasonable differentiation between a central versus regional locus of execution.

The most frequently posed division of leadership functions has been between the administrative versus supervisory processes. The earliest studies and attempts at a taxonomy of leadership skills and functions in special education (Mackie and Engel, 1956) (Graham, 1956) (Mackie and Snyder, 1957), have drawn this distinction at both local school system and state agency levels. Wherever these two roles have been described there has also been an inherent hierarchical relationship, with the administrative functions seen as superordinate to the supervisory ones. This has held, in spite of the obviously trivial nature of certain administrative tasks and the relatively crucial impact technical supervisory processes on the quality of service delivered.

While the administration-supervision dichotomy may provide a useful way to classify and concentrate leadership activity in a single strata organization, or within one strata of a multi-strata organization, it does not seem to provide a rationale for differentiating what can best be centralized versus decentralized in systems using a two-layered model.

A significant break with traditional organization has been described in the Minneapolis system (Johnson and Gross, 1973) where the new model was employed as a means of minimizing disability categories and relating maximally to the various levels of the service delivery system. The model divides the total service system into two major dimensions; (1) those which are based in regular schools and are in support of the regular class teacher and principal (mainstream programs) and (2) those for which a specialist is accountable, due to the low incidence, special physical setting, and largely categorical nature of the clientele. Within each of these two major program dimensions a generalist-administrator having management functions, and a specialist-supervisor having technical functions are described.

The Minneapolis model is described as having among its objectives the decentralization of the decision making process and the development of resource

allocation systems which are designed to focus financial resources at the point of program operation. However, the model does not speak to the problem of the two-layered system since its intermediate total size (about 60,000 enrollment) has not warranted decentralization of the entire special education organization in any manner akin to that found in the nation's larger systems. While the mainstream programs in the Minneapolis system are considered decentralized, the delegation of responsibility is to the school building level rather than to a regional office constituting an "in-between" layer.

However, the breakdown of functions into clusters associated with the generalist versus the specialist in the Minneapolis model may offer a type of framework for the larger, two layered systems.

Looking at the total scope of leadership functions associated with any organization, certain processes fall logically into the domain of the broadest, most centralized units of the organization while others fit better into the more directly operational, close to the grass roots, level. Policy development, for example, surely fits best as a function of the centralized office. Personnel selection, by contrast, probably needs to be carried out by administrators closest to the field of action. As we move from general administrative principles which apply to all organizations to the particulars of education, and ultimately to the specific mission of special education, the determination of what fits at each level becomes less clear.

We could place at the central level those functions concerned with planning, development, and evaluation, leaving to the decentralized offices the functions of management and direct supervision. Such a dichotomy would distinguish policy matters from operational matters, at least in a crude sense.

The clarity of the distinction is reduced by the broad scope of certain of the concepts. For example, while planning would be normally concerned with overall long range programmatic issues, day to day operational survival also has

a planning aspect. Similarly, the evaluation process is normally concerned with total programs, calling for a broad scale, central perspective, but specific units to be evaluated, e.g., instructional personnel, would best be examined by leadership staff nearest the action.

To elaborate on some of the activity which would be found at the central level, following this model, we would see planning and policy development as it relates to resource allocation, curriculum, and general program evaluation. Within the context of resource allocation, budget development and staff allocation would be specifically handled, as would the function of in-service development of existing staff. The functions of program advocacy, public relations and inter-agency liaison, would also probably be executed best from the most broad based, central level.

At the decentralized, regional level, the operational management functions would include: personnel selection and placement within the established allocations, personnel evaluation, case management and pupil placement, instructional supervision, resource management (including such tasks as materials procurement, facility procurement) and consumer (parent) relations.

If the functions of the two levels of administrators were actually as separated as the above dichotomization might imply, real problems of articulation would ensue. Operational managers would be faced with carrying out programs in which they had no voice in development. In actual practice, the centralized personnel would involve and solicit input from regional managers as they engaged in planning and development activity. Conversely, the regional personnel should seek the counsel of central administrators as they execute certain management tasks such as personnel evaluation. The crucial consideration is that the responsibility be fixed at one level or the other for each function, leaving few if any functions in an ambiguous, shared domain. Even though both levels might be involved in a particular activity, the responsible

authority concerning the function should be clear.

The line of authority relationship between regional and central offices becomes an awkward problem, regardless of the division of functions which is established. If maximum articulation and coordination within special education is seen as the most desired characteristic of a good system, it would be advantageous to have the special education administrators in the regional office report to the chief administrator of central special education office. Such an arrangement should enhance internal communication, insuring maximum consistency between policy planning and implementation. To the extent that programmatic operations in special education are different from those in the mainstream and warrant separate and special handling, a line relationship between central and regional personnel would be useful. However, this can also be expected to encourage a perception of special education as a separate, parallel system, apart from the mainstream.

If the desirable characteristic of a good system is maximum integration of special education, with an attitude of ownership of programs by the general administration in whose buildings and geographic regions the special programs are housed, then the line relationship of the regional special education administrators should be to those general administrators of the same regions. Neither the general superintendent of a region, nor the principal of a building can be expected to become very deeply invested in a program that merely occupies space in his territory but is essentially governed by a separate office from outside the territory.

It is just as hard to "have your cake and eat it too" in this domain as in any other. So the challenge would seem to be in finding an acceptable balance of responsibility and authority that insures sufficient operational involvement of the "locals" to maintain a sense of ownership, yet insures sufficient policy planning and evaluation involvement by the "centralists" to

maintain equality of opportunity for quality services for all pupils.

It is my thesis that we special educators have tended to perceive ourselves as specialists and have invited the perceptions of ourselves by others in the same "specialist" image. Our problem of striking a balance of power between the central and regional offices in large decentralized systems becomes greater when we use a rationale for organization which emphasizes our specialty (disability classifications and/or programmatic variations). The problem becomes less when we focus on leadership performance functions as the rationale for organization and job specification. But this is something we find difficult to do. We are so habituated, (and so are our colleagues) to our specialist role, that we find it awkward to think in terms of the differentiation of functions to be performed. Our specialty has been our badge, our shield, our weapon. In designing an administrative organization it has also been our Achilles heel.

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